

## [Coal Fields to the Cotton Mill]

Approximately 2,500 Words

SOUTH CAROLINA WRITERS' PROJECT

Life History

TITLE: WHY THE SIMMONS FAMILY WENT FROM THE  
COAL FIELDS TO THE COTTON MILL

Date of First Writing January 6, 1938

Name of Person Interviewed Mrs. Susie Simmons (white)

[?] Address 206 Greenville Street

Place Spartanburg, S.C.

Occupation House Wife

Name of Writer Elmer Turnage

Name of Reviser State Office

Mrs. Simmons, affectionately known as "Susie" by all who know her, prides herself on being as "spry as any of the children", yet she is 67 and the mother of thirteen. She is less than 5 feet tall but she lacks nothing in other dimensions, for she is almost as broad as she is tall. Her face and hands are scarred with the marks of a life of privation, but her small blue eyes sparkle and show no envy for those who have been more fortunate in worldly worldly possessions.

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The weather-beaten, four-room cottage rented by the Simmons family is situated on the outskirts of Spartanburg near the Spartan mill village. A cheap scarlet-covered living-room suite and several other articles of furniture are in the small hall that leads to the “front room”, leaving barely a passage way. This arrangement is understood when one enters the front 2 room, for he sees that it is also full of furnishings of an incongruous variety. Numerous pencilings, like hieroglyphs, mingle with the cracks on the scaly plastered walls. A laundry heater sits far out in the room; it is connected to the fireplace, around which shiny new tin had been placed. A large pot of beans bubbles and thumps peacefully on the little stove, and two or three flat-irons rest beside it. The mantel is literally filled with trinkets of the ten cent store variety, and a goodly assortment of home-remedy medicines. High above the mantel hangs a dust-covered picture which portrays the Lord's Prayer in gaudy lettering and designs. The hour of the day could be told about as well by the calendars for several years back which hang on the walls as by the little black-faced clock which holds its small place on the “fireboard”. An old-fashioned iron bed sits in one corner of the room, and in another sits an expensive one of the most modern design. The radio is a costly one but it is of little value unless some “mountain music” is on the air.

Susie doesn't know how long she has been a widow, but it has been sev'al year”, and “the old man warn't no 'count long 'fore he died.” All of the children are living 'cept one. The two single ones stay at home and the others “come in and out whenever they feel like it.” Despite the lack of modern conveniences the house is kept clean, and a jovial atmosphere always permeates the abode. The Simmons home is rarely devoid of “company”, for a neighbor has “drapped” in to chat with Susie, or some friends have come in to see “Doll and Walt”, the two single children. Doll has been married two or three times but at present she is single.

Susie kept her eye on her 3-year-old grandchild who was placing one chair upon another and trying to climb to the top of his “train.” Every now and then Susie would say: “Careful there, James; you'll fall 'fore you know it.” Presently he toppled to the floor and began

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screaming. Susie gathered him up in her lap, and in a few minutes his dirty 3 face was beaming again.

“Guess you heard 'bout Virgie being dead? Yes, this is her baby. All my others is married 'cept Virgie and Walt.”

Though honest and refined in her way, Susie showed no signs of abashment in relating the fact that her late daughter was never married. During the conversation she got up five or six times to get something with which she could appease the child. “We sho' is crazy 'bout him,” she declared; “don't know what we'd all do if it warn't for James.”

Susie's eyes narrowed and lost some of their natural friendliness when she was asked if she thought that her large family had been more conducive to her general welfare than a small one would have been.

“Well, it looks like I done pretty good. I got all my kids up grown, and that's more'n lots can say. 'Course they don't do much to help me, but what they do sho' comes in good. And one thing, they can all look after theirselves. Everybody can't say that — can they?

“You know, things sho' are better'n they used to be. We allus had 'bout as much to eat as we do now, but we don't have to work nigh so hard these days. I 'member back yonder in Hawkins County, Tenn., where I was born, things used to be awful bad and we had tough times, but a-body had some good times, too. The rich'uns had it 'bout as good as they do now, but the poor devils sho' sho had [it?] to pay.

“No, I don't know how old I am, 'zactly, but I can git Perry's (her husband) Bible; it's writ there in it. Mary writ it there; she's got more learning than any of the others. She went as fer as the Sixth. Lizie (Liza) can write a little, too.”

She thumbed through her husband's Bible, holding it upside down all the while. “Here, I guess you can find it better'n me,” she said. The only entries in it were — Susie Simmons,

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born April 6, 1871; Perry Simmons, born August 7, 1867; moved to South Carolina in 1919. "Well, 4 that's it. I know'd Mary writ it there. Now you can figger for yourself how old that makes me."

At this juncture Bill, a nephew of Susie, who is employed as a laborer on a W P A project, came in from his work. He eyed the interview with suspicion, and presently he asked if another investigation was being made. On being told the nature of the interview he said that he would be glad to tell the story of his life, but added that he would have to have a "salary" for the trouble. Susie informed Bill that his "eats" were ready, and he went immediately into the kitchen, which could be seen through the open door. He sat down at a long table which was made of plain boards and devoid of covering, and completely filled the large bowl before him with freshly cooked beans. As he entered the room he looked around and offered again to relate the story of his life provided he did not have to tell "everything", for there were some things, he declared, he would not even tell his grandmother. Besides the pine board table, the other furnishings in the kitchen consisted of a home-made cabinet, an oil stove and two or three cane chairs.

"Sho', I 'member Mammy," Susie continued; "why she stayed with me till atter Marthy (Martha) was born. She was a Housewright — Mary Housewright. Why, 'er no, I don't know nothing 'bout my daddy. See, I was jest a outside child. I never had no brothers n'er sisters. Mammy married a man one time, but that was way yonder 'fore I was born. His name was Dick Berry, I think. I know they hung him fer something 'er n'other — he warn't my daddy, though. I don't know what my daddy's name was — never heard Mammy say. She lived right there in Hawkins County when I was born ... stayed with her sister and her husband. Mammy sho' had a hard time then.

"I went to school a little when I was a kid back in the mountains, but a-body soon fergits what they learn in school, 'specially atter so many years. I know we had to go to school soon of a morning and stay till 4 5 o'clock. We had to walk three 'er four miles most of the time. As soon as I got big enough I had to help Mammy make a living. Why, we jest done

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a little of everything. We washed clothes fer people, and things like that. Mammy done work like that 'fore I was born; then atter I got big enough I pitched in and helped her. I 'member one time we was washing fer some rich people when it was awful cold weather. The ground was kivered with 'bout six inches of snow, and we got so cold that we nearly froze. We as't the people to let us come in the kitchen and finish rubbing the clothes, but they's a-feared we'd mess up the floors, and wouldn't let us come in the house. We didn't git much money for our work, mostly we got jest rations — vit'als, you know. Aunt Marge, that was Mammy's sister that we lived with, she had to work hard that a-way, too.

“Mammy used to work in the fields. She could do might nigh anything they was to do in field work. She cut flax, and broke flax, and spun flax. Lots of flax was grow'd up in them parts. Warn't no cotton grow'd though; never seed none till I come to South Ca'lina. Then Mammy was a good hand to spin and card wool. She made wool rolls as big as my arm. She set every night and worked at something like that till 11 o'clock. She made all our clothes, and made clothes and things for other folks, too. She sho' allus had a awful hard time. I allus helped her from the time I was big enough to drap corn till I got married.

“Lots of corn and 'taters was grow'd then, and folks had plenty meat and the like of that. 'Course time was when things got skace like it does now, but most times we had plenty to eat. We had to work hard fer it though, and many be the time I've walked four miles to the mill with a bushel of corn on my back. The miller would take out a half gallon of meal fer grinding a half bushel of corn, and a gallon of meal if he ground a whole bushel. Lord yes, I was strong then; I could pack a bushel of corn to the mill easy.

“I warn't but thirteen when I got married — jest a little girl like.

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Mammy come to live with me and Perry atter we was married. We lived in a little two-room log house. Perry driv oxen and hauled logs to the saw mill. He done work like that mostly fer a living. Mammy worked on jest as long as she lived. We all lived together and got

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along very good. Things was a lot different from what they are now. We didn't even have lamps back then, though we allus managed to have a light of some kind. Sometimes we'd put oil in a bottle and make a lamp by putting a rag in the neck of the bottle fer a wick. It made a fairly good light. Lots of times we'd take a piece of "lighter'd" — that's jest a piece of rich pine — and burn it for a lamp. We'd stick it up in a crack between the logs in the wall. The black smoke would jest bile up, but it made a pretty good light, least we thought it did then.

"As fer as cracks is concerned, we didn't have to look for a place to put the pine knot, fer the house was full of them. You could throw a cat through some of the cracks they was so big. It was snowing mighty hard the night Marthy was born, and they had to tie a quilt up over the bed to keep the snow from coming right in on us. Why, next morning there was 'bout two inches of snow on top of the quilt. People need plenty of air, you know, and I guess open houses like that is the best atter all. I guess that is the reason I stayed so healthy.

All my children was born in Tennessee 'cept the two last 'uns. Now Virgie was born in Virginia and Susie Belle was born here. All the kids went to school a little but not enough to 'mount to nothing much. Atter Marthy got married she moved to Ohio. I didn't see her no more fer a long time. It was during the time the "flu" was so bad that we went to see her. You 'member when that was. Me and the old man and all the ten kids started out to Ohio to see Marthy. We jest had 'bout enough money to make the trip on, fer we never did make enough on the farm to save anything. We stopped in Exer, Va., and seed some people we had know'd in Tennessee. Exer is a little mining town between Keokee and Appalachia. These people that we know'd tried to get us to stay there and get a job in the mines. We told 'em that we'd come back if we didn't stay in Ohio.

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"All the kids took down with the flu right atter we got to Marthy's house. We had to put up four beds, and then some had to lay across the head and some across the foot of the bed.

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I thought it was cold in Tennessee, but that warn't nothing to what it was in Ohio. The wind blow'd so hard that you could throw your hat ag inst the side of the house and it would hold it there all day. I guess we could have got a job there, but we didn't like it good enough to stay. I didn't like the doctor that waited on the kids a-tall. He allus had a handkerchief tied over his face when he come in, and he'd come in a-cussing and go out a-cussing. Jim, that's Marthy's old man, he said not to pay no 'tention to that, fer that was jest the way folks up there was 'customed to. Anyway, we decided we'd better go back to Virginia to live where people was more like us.

“Atter the kids got well, we scraped around and got enough money to go back to Exer. The old man and the boys didn't have a bit of trouble in finding a job, and they made good money, too. They made 'bout six dollars a day most of the time. The old man and two of the boys worked, the rest of 'em wasn't old enough to work in the mines. We stayed there 'bout a year and saved up some money, but the work was so dangerous we was afraid to stay any longer. Why, people jest got killed all the time. Every time anybody heard a message that somebody was killed, all the women and everybody went down to the mines to see if it was any of theirs.

“I made out at first that I wasn't afraid fer 'em to work in the mines, but I decided that it was better to know your folks was safe than to make good money. One time, five got killed and their heads was mashed so flat you couldn't tell who they was. They had to stuff cotton in 'em so they would look like somebody. The mines have walls, jest like the walls in a room, and sometimes a wall caves in and mashed the men to death. Marvelee's job in the mines was to 'tend to the trap door. It sho' was a dangerous job. He had to jump back in the ribs as soon as he opened the door, 'er a car would crush him to pieces.

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“If we hadn't found out 'bout the cotton mills, I guess we'd still be in Virginia, less'n we'd been killed 'er something. A man come through there one time and had a letter from the super' at Spartan Mills. He showed us the letter and said that we could get a job in

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Spartanburg if we wanted to. The old man and Charlie come first and worked at Spartan Mills about two months before they sent for us. We'd saved up a shoe box full of money, so we had plenty to make the trip on. Charlie and his daddy made 'bout two dollars a piece for a day's work. The old man didn't live long after we moved here; don't know how many years he's been dead, but it could be counted up.

"For a long time I had three boys, and sometimes four, working in the mill. They made about two dollars a day; that must have been in 1926. Well, no matter how many worked, we allus jest barely had enough to get along on. Up to 1925 they allus draw'd a little money every pay day, but after that it was all took up in the store. It went on that way for a long time, and we didn't see no money a-tall. By the time Doll and Walt got big enough to work, the others had married off, and they never was able to help me no more.

"Doll and Walt has been working at Whitney Mills 'bout six 'er seven years. They make twelve dollars a week a piece, and we manage to keep things going on that. "Course they do take up lots in the store, but it ain't like it used to be when a-body couldn't see no money a-tall. I need some shoes now, and ain't got enough money to get 'em. I was getting five dollars a month from the old age pension, but some tattlers went up there and got that stopped."